


all starts with the pilots, aircrew and maintainers documenting the problem. My plan, after writing this article, is to complete a hazrep, and I encourage you to do the same. The sooner our decision-makers know we have a safety-of-flight issue, the sooner we may get better hearing protection and comm.

If you don't think this problem affects you, think about the happy hours you attended in Pensacola or Oceana where many retired aviators were present. The older guys (WW II and some Korean vets, my father one of them) all had hearing aids in both ears. They flew around in TBFs, SBDs, SB2Cs, F4Fs, and

the granddaddies of noise, the F6F and F4U. They took off and landed with the canopies open, with no hearing protection other than the leather flight helmet. The Korean War vets who ushered in the jet age and the Vietnam-era aviators who flew with the first version of our modern hard-plastic helmet enjoyed a modest increase in hearing protection. Most of those gents did not wear hearing aids; they just spoke really loud.

Wouldn't it be nice if, in the years to come, when we're gathered in the T-Bar or talking in the I-Bar, we're not the guys wearing hearing aids or talking really loud? 

LCdr. Jones flies with VS-32.

Can You Hear Me Now?

The Importance of Reporting Radio-Communication Problems

By Valerie Bjorn and Jim Wilt

The TV show "20/20" recently did a piece on bystander apathy—a sociological phenomenon that occurs when a group of people knows something's wrong, but all stand by and do nothing because they think someone else is fixing it. The question for us today is whether bystander apathy is happening in naval aviation radio communications.

We are talking about communications you missed because you couldn't hear what was said—about having a hearing loss that does not improve over time, about taking corrective action to help prevent further hearing loss, and to improve the ability to hear important communication that may prevent accidents.

Why is hearing protection such a big issue?

Missed communication can be hazardous and expensive. In a recent Class B aviation mishap, the aircraft-mishap board faulted the pilot for missing a radio call advising him of an aircraft fuel-control problem. Because the pilot missed the auditory warning, the developing emergency inside the aircraft was handled wrong, resulting in the mishap.

A quick analysis of this mishap demonstrates how a radio call might have been missed. The noise in the cockpit is approximately 125 decibels during climb and cruise and 130 decibels during takeoff and landing. The pilot wore a properly fitted helmet that provided about 30 decibels of hearing protection across all hearing frequencies.

The Trend in Disability Costs Can Be Reversed



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The aircraft's auxiliary-communication-navigation-identification panel produces sound levels up to 125 decibels. Average human speech is about 60 decibels, so the 125 decibels easily should have been heard. The combination of engine noise, the inability of the helmet and earplugs to reduce engine noise while letting through warning sounds, most likely resulted in the pilot missing the auditory cautions and warnings. Better sound-dampening equipment probably would have improved communication quality.

Let's look at this hearing problem a little more in depth. What about the Sailors running

around on the roof of a carrier? Consider these points:

- How many people do you know on the flight deck who don't wear earplugs?
- How many LSOs never wear hearing protection so they can hear comms?
- How many people in their 20s and 30s do you know who joke about lost hearing—who gave up good hearing to get the job done?
- How many people do you know who crank up their radio to max volume and still strain to hear?

Navy technology, health, safety, and medical experts are working closely with Air Force and Army counterparts to improve radio communications and hearing protection. However, the expert's efforts are hampered because no requirement

exists for better hearing protection percolating up from flight-deck personnel. No reports are coming in from these personnel stating that a hearing problem exists, although veterans administration hearing-disability claims show there's a significant problem and it's getting worse each year.

You are part of the solution. You have to tell NavAir about a problem, so they can fix it. If you are having trouble hearing radio communications, or if you are concerned about jet-noise-induced hearing loss, fill out a hazard report (hazrep), which is explained in OPNAV Instruction 3750.6R, "Naval Aviation Safety Program." You can report anonymously; don't be a bystander. Whether you are an E-2 or an O-5, take the initiative to report your hazardous situation and document the problem. Your hazrep will help establish an official, documented Navy requirement that will aid us in getting better technology to you, to your peers, and to the aviators behind you. 🦅

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